



## **KENTUCKY FIRST STEPS' POSITION ON IMPLEMENTATION OF NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS**

### **Philosophy**

Services provided through First Steps are designed to help families develop the ability to meet the developmental needs of their child. This includes identifying when the family or their child need special supports. These supports and services should include, not only the parent, but also extended family members and other community caregivers. This inclusion will strengthen the natural resources in both the home and the community.

### **Purpose**

In the reauthorization of IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) in 1997, the emphasis on natural environments (the use of resources and supports that occur naturally in the child's environment) was an effort to insure that early intervention would focus on helping families and the community develop their ability to meet the needs of the children with delay or potential for delay. This was not a new emphasis. The first amendment to IDEA which established early intervention services said that its intent was to "enhance the capacity of families to meet the special needs of their infants and toddlers."


The use of natural environments:

- promotes community acceptance for children with disabilities;
- expands options for services and supports;
- provides opportunities to blend early intervention services with informal supports;
- counters the idea that program models already in existence determine the location of the service.
- allows families and other caregivers to identify opportunities in their everyday lives to teach their child
- provides opportunities for children to use what they learn throughout their daily routines;
- insures that toddlers with disabilities have the opportunity to interact with children without disabilities, rather than being in specialized or isolated settings;
- prepares children to live successfully within society; and
- allows families to live a more typical life.

## **SETTINGS AND SERVICE DELIVERY**

### **Definition of Natural Environments**

Natural environments mean settings and service delivery systems that are natural or typical for the family and for the child's same-age peers who have no disability. This includes the home and other community settings in which children without disabilities participate. Natural learning environments are the places where children experience everyday, typically occurring learning opportunities that promote and enhance their development. Services and supports should encourage opportunities for the development of relationships with children without disabilities and with a variety of adults in the



community. These opportunities should also provide typically developing children with the opportunity for positive interactions and relationships with infants and toddlers with disabilities.

### **Characteristics of a Natural Environment**

Natural environments:

- are suited to the child developmentally and chronologically;
- are individually planned;
- meet the unique needs of the child and family;
- are identified in partnership with the family;
- occur in the same environment where there are peers who are not disabled;
- occur where there are adaptations and supports to insure successful experiences; and
- occur where there are supportive, qualified caregivers.

Examples of settings and services that are considered natural environments are: home, daycare or childcare settings, center-based programs for children with and without disabilities, library, church, restaurants, and parks. Please keep in mind that this list is not exhaustive.


Natural environments are not services or settings:

- chosen for administrative convenience;
- chosen for personnel convenience;
- chosen for budgetary reasons;
- where only infants and toddlers with disabilities are served;
- chosen without family input and approval;
- in isolation of family and child daily routines;
- that place unreasonable demands on families;
- without appropriate adaptations and supports;
- where caregivers are not supportive and qualified; and
- which are unsafe.

## **NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS**

### **The Family**

The goal of First Steps is to increase the family's ability to understand and meet the developmental needs of their child through the use of natural resources and supports. First Steps service providers, particularly the Primary Service Coordinator, should help the family understand the importance of using natural environments and offer them assistance to identify their natural supports (e.g. extended family and childcare), routines (e.g. meal and recreational time) and resources (e.g. community library, church) and incorporate those into the delivery of all First Steps services. First Steps should help families use and strengthen those natural supports to build connections to their community and its resources. The family should be linked to public and private programs



that will address the specific needs of their child and help the family address such issues as housing and medical services. First Steps providers should be aware of the local, state and federal resources which meet the needs of the child and family. These resources might include: other parents in their community that can provide support; parent organizations, disability- specific organizational information; training for families; and opportunities for formal and informal networking.

### **The Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP)**

Outcomes and strategies in the IFSP should indicate the functional skills that the child will learn to enhance development. Basic skills are those that can be embedded into natural routines and activities in which the child and family participate (e.g., expressing wants and needs, initiating social interactions, grasping/holding objects, holding head up, feeding self, demonstrating cause-effect relationships). The strategies identified for each outcome statement should reflect the specific natural routines and activities in which the skills can be embedded (e.g., expressing wants and needs can be taught during mealtimes when a child wants a drink or another bite of food). In addition, these routines and activities should be those identified as priorities by the family through an ecological assessment, which looks at many different environments(e.g. home, community, play). Adaptations and supports needed to assure that the outcome is achieved should also be mentioned in the strategies for achieving the IFSP outcomes. For example, a child might need (a) a communication board with picture symbols (adaptation) in order to express his wants and needs during mealtimes, as well as (b) the services of a speech/language pathologist (support). In addition, to the greatest extent possible, the supports used to implement the outcome should be those found in natural environments (e.g., family members, childcare providers, neighbors) instead of, or in addition to, those provided by First Steps.


### **Evaluation & Assessment**

Using an ecological model of assessment, the interaction between a child and the environment within his/her daily activities and routines allows the child's best performance. The assessment team should focus on ongoing assessment of the child's developmental skills, challenges, individual differences and responses alone and in social interactions, in different experiences and settings, and with different people throughout the day.

### **Transition**

Service providers should work with families to help them understand the differences in focus and terminology that exist between early intervention services and preschool services offered through the public schools, Head Start or other preschool programs, such as child care agencies. When planning for the child's transition, the service provider should assist the family in developing ways to address the needs of the child within their own family and the larger community. In addition, the child/family outcomes should address specific skills and activities the child and family need in order to successfully transition to the next environment.

When children leave the Early Intervention System, the family must have a transition meeting and plan, even if the child does not go on to preschool special education



services. The child's service coordinator must arrange for this to occur in a timely manner so that the family has adequate time to prepare for and develop a plan for gathering the information they need to make appropriate decisions about future services. Planning for the transition out of early intervention by partnering with the family to identify their child's needs within his daily routines, assisting the family to build on their competencies and using natural supports throughout their early intervention experience, should result in a positive, smooth transition into the next environment.

## **CONSIDERATION OF OTHER CIRCUMSTANCES**

### **Justification**

In order to properly justify why services are not occurring in a natural environment, the following information must be in the IFSP:

- why the early intervention cannot be achieved satisfactorily in a natural environment;
- how the services provided in this location or using this approach will carry over to support the child's ability to function in his natural environment; and
- a time line when the service might be expected to be returned to a natural environment approach.

### **No Justification**

Because service decisions made in early intervention, within the development of the IFSP, is a team decision-making process, justification for a service decision that establishes services outside the practice of the principles of natural environments cannot be based alone on family choice. While the family provides significant input regarding the provision of appropriate early intervention services, ultimate responsibility for determining what services are appropriate for a particular infant or toddler, including the location and approach of such services, rests with the IFSP team as a whole. Therefore, it would be inconsistent with early intervention practice for decisions of the IFSP team to be made based solely on preference of the family. The state bears no responsibility for early intervention services that are selected exclusively by the family, outside of the IFSP team, or those services that are selected outside the bounds of natural environments without clear justification for the choice.